

[Student Name]

Professor [Name]

Global Narratives

[Date]

A Less Than Ideal Life: A Critical Analysis of Margaret Atwood's "Happy Endings"

Death is inevitable; if you want happiness in life, try option A. "Happy Endings" explores the elements we consider essential to having an ideal life by presenting six parallel storylines with varying circumstances. The sections, labelled A to F, emphasise the variability of life's trajectory by presenting vastly different storylines. However, each storyline ultimately ends the same way: the characters die. This morbid conclusion highlights the irony of the title "Happy Endings", which is a prevalent motif across the storylines. In this essay, I argue that "Happy Endings" illustrates the irrelevance of the concept of an ideal life. To support this argument, I will first examine the depiction of an ideal life in section A and how the ideal life might not be as glamorous as it seems. I will then explain how the scenarios perceived to be less ideal in subsequent sections end on a positive note. Finally, I will highlight the universality of death regardless of whether or not the characters have led ideal lives.

"Happy Endings" starts by defining the ideal life in an ironically simplistic manner to question the desirability of such a lifestyle. Atwood introduces the readers to this ideal life with the line, "if you want a happy ending, try A" (Pg 43). The didactic tone used is reminiscent of the instructions in choose-your-own-adventure style games. This enhances the stakes for the reader as they hope to find the "happy ending" of the story, which is the first section of the story. Moving

on to diction, using the second person pronoun "you" engages with the reader directly, keeping them invested in the ideal life depicted in section A. However, the indefinite article "a" used before "happy ending" implies the possibility of multiple "happy ending(s)", questioning the absolute nature of the conventional ideal life presented later. More importantly, this line references the brief and nondescriptive depiction of an ideal life in section A. For instance, Atwood uses bland adjectives like "stimulating and challenging" to describe the characters' jobs, sex lives and hobbies. Atwood is primarily concerned about how most people subscribe to a particular lifestyle deemed "better" than others. In all, "Happy Endings" warns readers to avoid buying into, or at least openly acknowledge, the closed nature of the concept of an ideal life.

Beyond unravelling the truth of an ideal life, Atwood also offers an alternative perspective towards scenarios that are usually viewed negatively. After section A, "Happy Endings" gradually explores more realistic scenarios with explicit detail. This is shown in the line, "she hopes he'll discover her and get her to the hospital in time and repent and then they can get married, but this fails to happen and she dies" (Pg 44). At first glance, this line describes a tragic end to a story about unrequited love. However, Atwood suggests otherwise with her adept use of writing techniques. Notably, this line is an example of a run-on sentence with multiple conjunctions "and" to string the chain of events together. The story's momentum crescendos as readers follow along with the increasingly dramatic affairs, leaving the reader breathless as they are eager to discover what happens next. However, the story ends abruptly with "but this fails to happen and she dies". This ending stuns the reader as it subverts their expectations of a generically positive resolution. Nevertheless, upon closer examination, the character's death happened at the climax of her life when she was filled with passion and desire for the love of her life. In an endless barrage of "a what and a what and a what" (Pg 45), she has found her "how and why", which is all that matters

for Atwood. In sum, Atwood encourages readers to change their perceptions of tragedies to notice the underlying positive aspects.

Nevertheless, everything has to come to an end. In the final section of "Happy Ending", Atwood emphasises the certainty of death as the actual ending. This is illustrated in the line "the only authentic ending is the one provided here: John and Mary die. John and Mary die. John and Mary die." (Pg 45). This line can be seen as a plea for readers not to harp on the fairytale endings and happy-ever-afters espoused by popular fiction. The repetition of the phrase "John and Mary die" emphasises the inevitability of death, forcing the reader to come to terms with this fact. The use of present tense is also an effective tool for Atwood's direct address to the reader as it makes her message seem more urgent and personal. This contrasts the escapist nature of the ideal life as all the characters eventually experience the same end regardless of whether or not they follow the blueprint of the "perfect" life. In all, Atwood reminds the reader that the ideal life is nothing more than an arbitrary concept that ultimately ends in death.

In conclusion, I have shown how there are different interpretations of the ideal life. I have also explained how tragedies could be viewed more positively. Finally, I have highlighted how death is the common denominator for everyone, regardless of the lifestyle they lead. In hindsight, Atwood's "Happy Endings" shows the unpredictability and looming tragedy surrounding the prized happy ending. The ideal life is just that, an ideal, because in reality, there is no framework for a "perfect" life. When we embrace and idolise an ideal, we surrender the power inherent in the freedom of leading our lives. Rather than following predictable paths, we should be aware of the irrelevance of such constructs. Detractors who argue that the ideal life provides a framework for people to lead their lives are blinded by the certainty the ideal life offers. However, the rigidity of its structure is often its downfall. Atwood's satirical tone and subversion of writing conventions

present her arguments in a palatable form, but has "Happy Endings" altered the perception of an ideal life? The effects are still unclear. But we can be sure "Happy Endings" has the potential to provoke such change.

(1000 Words)

Works Cited

Atwood, Margaret. "Happy Endings." *The Story and Its Writer: An Introduction to Short Fiction*.
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